

## INTRODUCTION



**Rachael**

*Don't let them give up on me. I can learn even if I'm behind. Call my new school and tell them.*

### The Nexus of Two Important Issues

It's an appealing notion, born of nostalgia, that all of America's children have the comforts of a home. Think again. As we move into the new millennium, more than one million children are homeless on a given night. Many of these children are school aged, and because of the daily demands of finding food, shelter and safety they often miss school and substantially lag behind others in their classrooms. An estimated one-fifth of homeless children don't attend school, and academic success for those who do attend is discouragingly elusive. Homeless students are four times more likely than housed students to experience a serious developmental delay, they have twice the rate of learning disabilities of other children, more than one-third repeat at least one grade, and they are suspended from school twice as often as their classmates.<sup>1</sup>

The current conventional wisdom is that academic success is attainable for *all* students by setting new standards defining what students should know and be able to do, by aligning assessments to the standards, and by holding schools and communities accountable for students' performance and achievement gains. For educators who work with students experiencing homelessness, standards-based reform both holds promise and presents concern about what's at stake: that students whose lives are characterized by instability, persistent poverty, family chaos, and fear will be further marginalized by efforts intended to raise the bar for everyone.

*Starting to Unravel the Knot* was a day-long conversation that brought together issues of assessment and homelessness. A first-of-its-kind gathering of teachers, psychologists, researchers and advocates, the conversation focused 18 minds on the theme of assessing students to serve learning.<sup>2</sup> Educators who work with highly-mobile students describe assessment as a knotty problem, entwining issues related to evaluating programs that serve homeless students, high-stakes testing, and informal classroom-level assessments. We intentionally focused on classroom assessments because they're not a public index of success or failure but rather a window into the life circumstances, learning styles, and achievement levels of students. Done well, these assessments can provide teachers, students, and their parents/guardians meaningful information about how more and better learning can take place. The importance of this information is considerably greater for highly-mobile

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<sup>1</sup> The Better Homes Fund. (1999). *America's New Outcasts—Homeless Children: A Public Policy Report from the Better Homes Fund*. Newton, MA: The Better Homes Fund.

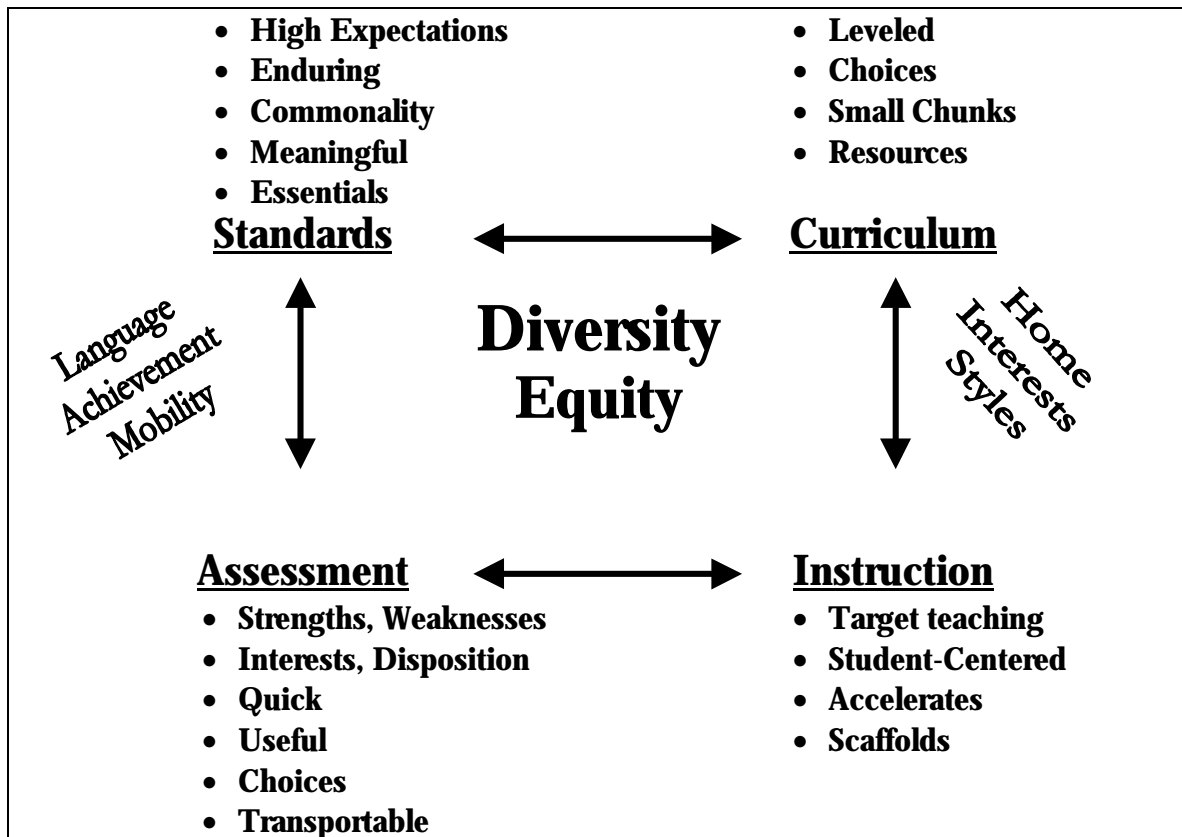
<sup>2</sup> Because homeless students did not participate in this first conversation, we symbolically included them by sharing with one another what they have taught us. Throughout this document you will see silhouettes with quotes from the participants honoring children and youth we know and work with.

students—who move in and out of classrooms and attend school for limited periods of time—since test results from standardized, high-stakes tests are often unavailable or irrelevant given their checkered educational histories.

### Setting the Stage—What are the Critical Issues for Homeless Students?

We started the day by looking at the links between standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and applied the reform model illustrated in Figure 1 to issues for homeless and other highly-mobile students. By placing diversity and equity at the center of the model, there was an acknowledgement that homeless students experience different life circumstances than their housed classmates, including persistent poverty, chronic fear, family chaos, and the lack of a home.

**Figure 1**  
**Standards-Based Reform Model**



The model shows that curricula based on essential standards can provide learning resources for homeless students such as common learning targets that can be designed into small units with varied learning activities. Student-centered instruction can further target teaching to what students need to know and be able to do by providing choices in activities and accelerated and supported learning opportunities. Assessments aligned to a standards-based

instructional program can provide opportunities for teachers and students to establish a relationship and gain insight to one another's strengths, weaknesses, interests, and dispositions.

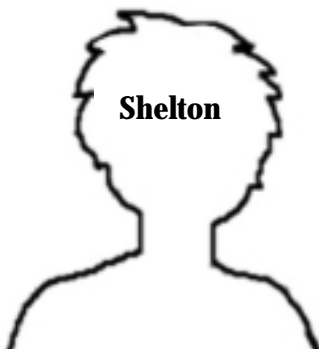
With this as the backdrop, we identified the following classroom-level assessment issues as critical issues for further discussion throughout the day:

*Using Assessment to Build Caring Relationships Between Teachers and Students by:*

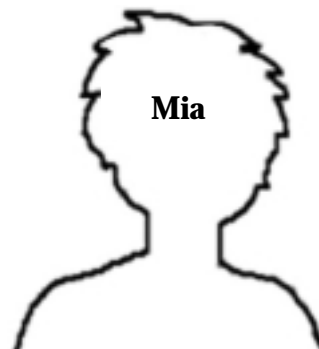
- Developing assessment tools that establish a positive rapport with students, help get to know students and their life circumstances, identify strengths and weaknesses, and build upon student interests.
- Assessing students in ways that don't require reading fluency.
- Demonstrating that assessment results will be used to promote a sense of belonging into the school community.
- Involving parents/guardians to support learning and help meet students' basic needs.
- Explaining why assessment is taking place and how data will be used.

*Understanding the Classroom Context by:*

- Ensuring that practical considerations are addressed such as the availability of students to participate in assessments and the transportability of assessment information to other schools.
- Recognizing that timing is important, conducting assessments immediately and continuously.
- Acknowledging that teaching highly-mobile students is challenging, and that teachers have limited time to individualize assessments and instruction.



*How very difficult it can be to remember to focus on things when your life is so unpredictable and scattered.*



*There's always hope.*

## WORKING THROUGH THE FIRST SCENARIO—ENTERING SCHOOL AND STAYING FOR A SHORT BUT UNKNOWN PERIOD OF TIME

We presented ourselves with the following scenario:

*Janie Gates is a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher in a suburban school district. Mid-year, the principal tells her that the next day a new student will be joining her class. Her new student, Jack Smith, as it turns out, has spent the last six months living in various motels, and currently lives in a car with his mother and two younger sisters. The principal assumes that Jack will be at the school for a few weeks. What does Janie need to know and be able to do?*

In small groups we addressed the following three questions based on the typical situation presented in the first scenario:

### **What do teachers need to know about students experiencing homelessness?**

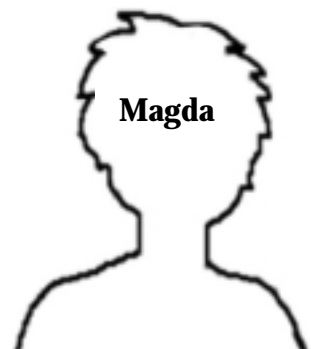
They need to:

- Understand the life circumstances and needs of homeless, highly-mobile, and poor students.
- Develop a comprehensive health, social, and educational profile of each child to assess their readiness to learn.
- Have knowledge and skills about weaving life skills development throughout the academic curriculum and modifying instruction into small units with meaningful content that can measure short-term rate gains.

### **How does having students moving in and out of classrooms affect curriculum, instruction, and assessment?**

Mobility among students in the classroom can:

- Be disruptive to the scope, sequence, and pacing of the curriculum.
- Require teachers to backtrack in the curriculum.
- Cause students to be further marginalized from learning activities.
- Challenge teachers to experiment and expand their repertoire of instructional strategies to engage diverse learners.
- Create a need for school site and district processes to transition highly-mobile students into classrooms at the appropriate grade levels and in ways that don't stigmatize them for what they don't know (e.g., newcomers' classrooms, diagnostic centers, transition rooms, student study teams).
- Pressure school communities to focus on high stakes assessment scores over classroom level assessment results.



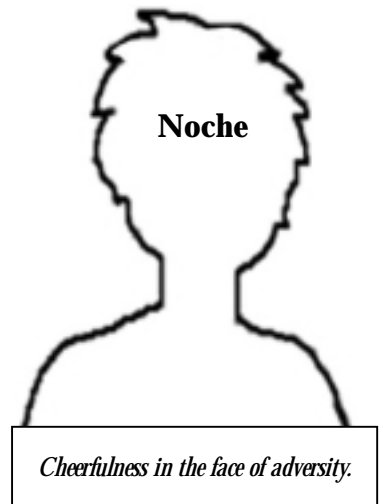
*Being homeless can intensify what's difficult about being a child—stress without the tools to cope.*

- Demand that teachers view learning gains in the broader context of their students' life circumstances, particularly sporadic attendance at school.
- Heighten awareness and value for the utility of informal classroom-level assessments (e.g., developmental assessments, quick assessments, conversation- and observation-based judgments, running records of progress).
- Amplify the critical need for teachers to receive professional development and support to effectively teach highly-mobile students.

### **How can teachers assess what students know and can do when they are highly mobile?**

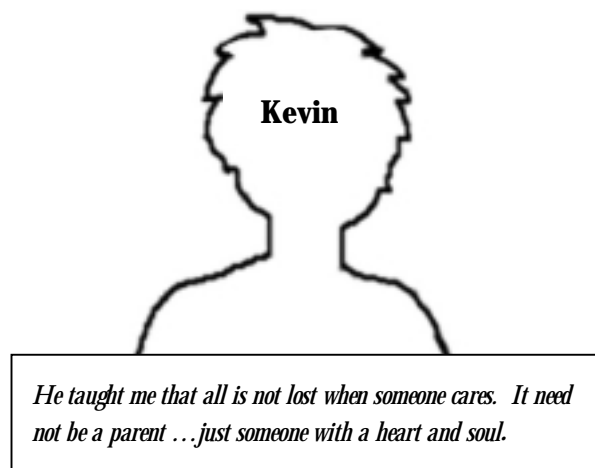
Teachers can:

- Give a quiz or a quick performance assessment—a math sampler, a passage to read.
- Develop a curriculum-embedded task.
- Assign a student a job and assess the performance.
- Use journal writing with prompts to elicit students' interests, life experiences, and writing skills.
- Have focused, private, and ongoing conversations with students.
- Have students speak into a tape recorder about their life, interests, and school experiences.



Together as a large group, we noted that the following themes held steady across the three questions:

- The importance of welcoming homeless students into the school community, and how classroom-level assessments, when done well, can be a vehicle for demonstrating caring and high expectations.
- The primacy of providing immediate, continuous, and meaningful assessment information to students, parents/guardians, educators, and other support providers.



## WORKING THROUGH THE SECOND SCENARIO—EXITING SCHOOL

We presented ourselves with the following scenario:

*Several weeks later, Janie is notified by the principal that Jack will be leaving the school the following day. How could she quickly and accurately organize and communicate what Jack has been studying and what he has achieved?*

Our first insights to answering this question emerged from observing a “fish bowl” activity, in which three educators who directly work with homeless students generated ideas to communicate about Jack’s school experience and achievement levels. We summarized that teachers and school administrators can:

- Develop a report-card-in-progress to regularly communicate achievement.
- Maintain an updated inventory checklist of knowledge, skills, learning styles, and dispositions.
- Organize a portfolio of student work.
- Prepare a personalized letter to be given to the next teacher by students or parents/guardians.
- Maintain an anecdotal record of impressions and professional judgments.
- Provide a prepaid phone card to students or parents/guardians that would allow the former teacher to be contacted about students’ whereabouts, and contact information to forward assessment materials.
- Set up electronic transfer systems across school, district, and state boundaries to exchange assessment and vital enrollment information.
- Establish a toll-free number that lists all new student placements to facilitate tracking and teacher-to-teacher communication.



- *Listen first, ask questions later.*
- *Enlist everybody to help provide for your needs.*
- *Listen again, and make sure her little sisters get heard too.*



- *Personal connection keeps people going*
- *Personal connection has to be nurtured and guarded on a daily basis.*
- *Every child has a “higher self” to tap into—circumstances and behaviors don’t always point to this.*
- *Personal connection makes a difference in attendance and achievement.*

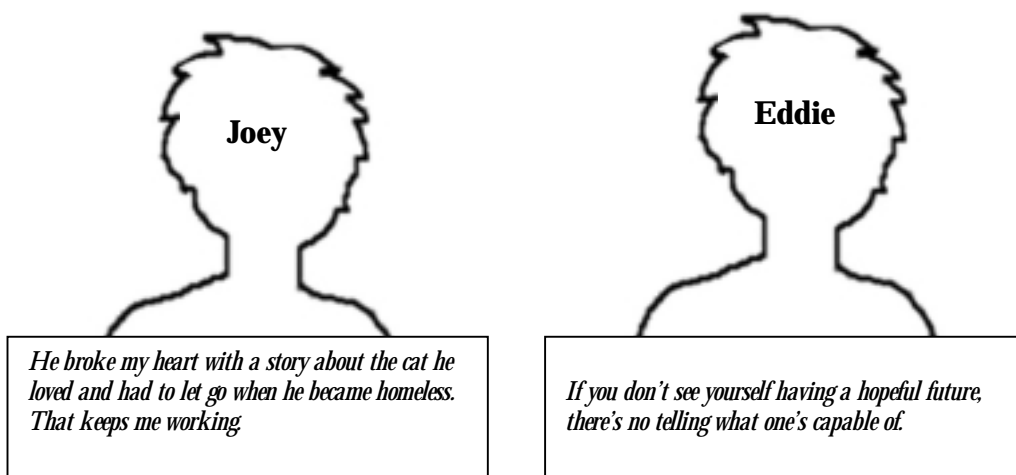
To more fully explore exiting school issues, we addressed the following three questions:

**What does the next school need to know?**

- That the school community from which the student came cares about all of its students and about creating continuity and coherence in their school experiences as they move from one school to another.
- Relevant information about students' life and school histories.
- Assessment results that identify strengths, gaps, interests, and dispositions.
- Specific data about mastery in reading and mathematics.
- Student diagnoses or special instructional, health, and social services received at other schools.
- Information about students' learning modalities.
- Documentation of standardized test results.
- Information about personal and social skills development.
- How to access records from previous schools.

**How can the next teacher be informed?**

- Personal contact from teachers and counselors using phone, fax, mail, or e-mail.
- A hard-copy portfolio of student work or a portfolio-on-disk.
- A videotape, including student and teacher presentations.
- Post students' work on a school or district website.
- Via a standardized academic and behavioral (social/interpersonal) rubric that easily conveys assessment results from multiple sources in one summary form.



### **How can students and parents/guardians assist in this process?**

- Provide students and parents/guardians with contact information (e.g., a card with phone number, fax number, e-mail address, website address).
- Have students identify selected work samples and assemble a portfolio.
- Have students prepare a journal that expresses their learning preferences, interests, strengths, gaps and what they're working on in the curriculum.
- Provide a phone card for students and parents/guardians to contact their former school to send information to the new school.
- Organize with students and parents/guardians a folder of vital assessment and enrollment records.
- Continuous three-way conferencing with parents/guardians, teachers, and students.

### **WORKING THROUGH THE THIRD SCENARIO—WHAT DO TEACHERS NEED TO KNOW AND BE ABLE TO DO?**

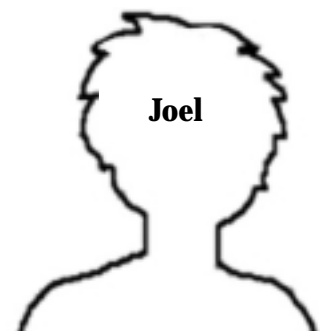
*Janie's now a teacher on special assignment, and she has asked you to participate on a Task Force to develop an assessment "Tip Sheet" for educators working with highly-mobile students. What information needs to be included?*

In small groups we addressed the following three questions presented in the third scenario:

#### **What are the desirable characteristics for assessments and assessment practices for homeless and other highly-mobile students?**

They ought to:

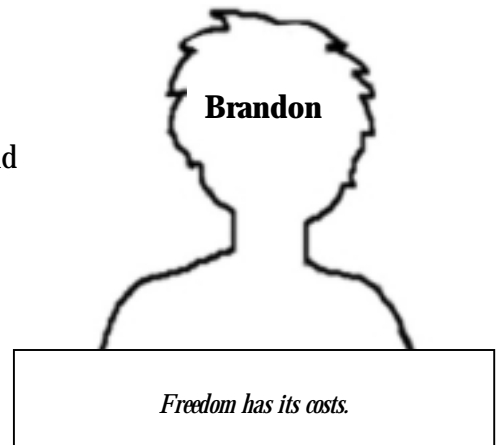
- Be quickly administered upon unplanned arrival and departure.
- Measure knowledge and skills that allow for different learning styles and forms of expression.
- Link to classroom instructional targets and essential standards.
- Result in instructional decision making to better engage students in learning.
- Be prescriptive, not punitive.
- Help teachers set short-term and longer-term learning goals that are shared with students.
- Involve parents/guardians and students.
- Be used continuously to provide rate-gain scores.



*The need for a predictable and stable place, be it a home, shelter, school or person.*



- Promote self-reflection for students and teachers.
- Provide generalizable information to teachers at other schools.
- Yield exemplars of student work.
- Minimizes bias in all forms.
- Be relevant to the curriculum and instructional program, and embedded in the current lessons.
- Be manageable and practical for the teacher to administer.
- Measure emotional well-being, attitudes, and dispositions.
- Be technically sound, valid and reliable measures.
- Produce credible data.
- Be used to advocate for the services and supports students need.



### **What do teachers need to know about assessing homeless students?**

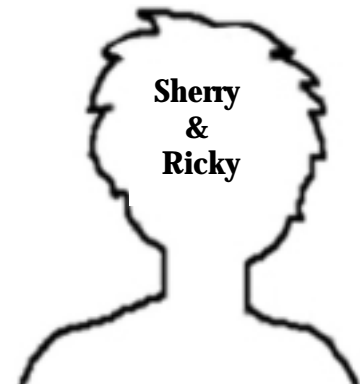
They need to know about the:

- Comprehensive mental and physical health of their students.
- Effects of homelessness and mobility on students' health, well-being, and academic achievement.
- Achievement levels of their students in the core curriculum areas—mathematics, reading/language arts, social science, and science.
- Family support systems.
- Various assessment tools and practices available to evaluate completed student work and work-in-progress.
- Value of informal assessments, such as conversations and observations, to assess what students know and can do.
- Difference between high-stakes and classroom-level assessments, and for this to be an imperative to use classroom-level assessment information to examine their own effectiveness and guide instruction.
- Importance of increasing awareness among the school community about the effects of homelessness.
- School and community resources available to homeless students and their families.

### **What do they need to be able to do?**

They need to be able to:

- Communicate assessment results to students, parents/guardians, and other teachers.
- Work with other teachers to develop and evaluate assessment techniques and to discuss assessment results and implications.
- Effectively manage a classroom comprised of highly-mobile students.
- Obtain or to generate information about students' past school experiences.
- Reach the soul of their students, and convey genuine caring and support.
- Welcome all students into their school community.
- Prepare for students' departing the classroom at any point in the curriculum.
- Treat students with dignity and respect for what they know and are able to do.
- Respond immediately to students' learning needs and styles.
- Explicitly articulate learning targets and essential standards.
- Set benchmarks to measure progress.
- Assess using multiple modalities.
- Adapt their instructional strategies to incorporate ongoing assessments.
- Adapt instructional strategies for all students to be successful learners.
- Modify homework assignments so they can be successfully completed.
- Be a stable, caring presence in their students' lives.
- Teach, model, and reward prosocial life skills (e.g., problem solving, critical thinking, cooperative learning).
- Maintain student records for quick transfer.
- Praise constantly and realistically.
- Conduct learning activities that produce student work samples.



*Love and caring sustains everything*

## GETTING OUT THE WORD

*Starting to Unravel the Knot* is the beginning of a conversation about how to promote classroom success for homeless and other highly-mobile students. How, then, do we carry this conversation forward? Suggestions included:

*Networking*—via word of mouth, the State McKinney Act Coordinators, established professional development systems, and advocacy and dissemination organizations.

*Using Electronic Media*—e-mail, website, and listserv communications; and public radio and television broadcasting.

*Providing Professional Development*—with and through community-based organizations, preservice teacher training programs, and via conferences and workshops.

*Piloting Research and Development*—developing and studying assessment and communication processes across school communities in which highly-mobile students regularly transfer.

Our day was structured as a conversation with the intent that what was learned and shared would be a catalyst for further dialogue and a platform for action. Many issues remain to be examined, among them the reliability and validity of specific kinds of informal assessments, communicating between schools, and providing for teacher professional development and ongoing support.

Our belief that classroom-level assessment can serve learning for *all* students is firm; where we remain shaky is how to make *all* classrooms work well for students who receive the least amount of schooling. The choices we make today about standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment will determine whether the full promise of the standards-based vision will be realized for students, who through no fault of their own, lack a place to call home.

